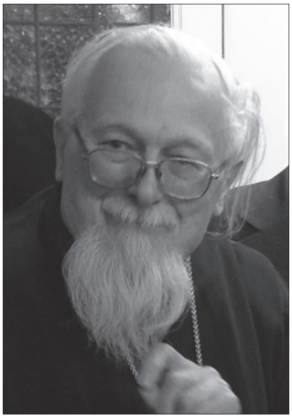
Alexander Nadson (1926–2015) – in Memoriam

BY

JIM DINGLEY*



PICTURE: Fr Alexander Nadson in 2015. Photo credit: Yaraslau Kryvoi

The death at the age of 88 in Barnet Hospital on Wednesday 15 April 2015 of Mitred Archpriest Alexander Nadson, Apostolic Visitor for Belarusian Catholics abroad and a long time editor of the *Journal of Belarusian Studies* leaves a void in the lives of many people throughout the world. Whether Belarusian or not, Christian or of no particular religious faith – those who knew him respected and loved him for his luminous spirituality, his passionate scholarship and his ardent love of Belarus.

Fr Nadson was born Aliaksandar Bočka on 8 August 1926 in the small town of Haradzieja, then in the part of Belarus that had been ceded to Poland by Soviet Russia under the terms of the Treaty of Riga of 1921. His father Anton had served as an officer in the army of the Russian Tsar in the First World War, and had participated in the 1920 armed uprising against the Bolsheviks in the Belarusian town of Slucak. He moved to Haradzieja, where he became a teacher in the primary school which was later attended by the young Alexander. Subsequently the boy transferred to the Polish High School in Baranavičy. By the time he reached the age of 16 his schooling had been controlled by three masters – firstly the Poles,

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then the Soviets (after the occupation of Eastern Poland in 1939 as a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact), and thirdly by the Nazis in 1941.

The years of German occupation marked the period in which the future priest's character was formed. He studied at the Teacher Training College in Niasviž, where – as he was later to write – the atmosphere was permeated with a truly national sense of being Belarusian. He used to recall one teacher in particular, his teacher of mathematics. In 1943 he joined the Union of Belarusian Youth – an organisation barely tolerated by the German occupiers, and in the following year enrolled in the Minsk officers' training school. In the face of the advancing Red Army the German High Command evacuated the trainees from Minsk.

He would recall one of his last sights of Minsk for many years – as an 18-year-old he departed past the Opera House, which survives to this day, then standing intact above a totally ruined city. The trainees were moved to Besançon in France where they were supposed to fight the Allies. They refused and fled, many – like the young Alexander – joining the French Resistance. By the end of the war he was fighting in Italy as a soldier with the Polish 2nd corps under General Anders.

Along with the Anders army Alexander was moved to the UK in 1946. Here he was demobilised and began to play an active role in the Belarusian organisations that were springing up. At the same time as settling into a new country and learning a new language, he succeeded in obtaining a mathematics degree from London University in 1953. This was the year in which Alexander moved to the Greek College in Rome to undertake the necessary study and training required to become a priest of the Eastern Rite. He had been guided on to this path by Fr (later Bishop) Ceslaus Sipovich, who himself had been sent by the Vatican to establish a Belarusian Catholic Mission in the UK.

Alexander was ordained in 1958 and in the following year returned to London to take up his duties. It was at this time that the "Belarusian village" in North Finchley was beginning to expand. A property was acquired to house a boarding school for the sons of Belarusian immigrants in Western Europe; he was appointed headmaster in 1961. Another house was later purchased to house a growing collection of books that, on 15 May 1971, was formally opened as the Belarusian Library and Museum named after the 16th-century Belarusian first printer, Francis Skaryna.

Fr Alexander assumed the role of librarian and developed the institution to the point where it could justifiably be regarded as the foremost collection in the world, outside Belarus itself, of books (including many rare publications), maps, journals and artefacts relevant for the study of the complex area east of Poland once known as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Thanks to his efforts the library acquired a world-wide reputation, attracting scholars from a wide range of countries who found the atmosphere prevailing there both inspiring and convivial.

The library also provided Fr Alexander with many opportunities for research. He gave several lectures to the Anglo-Belarusian Society, and published pioneering articles in the Society's *Journal of Belarusian Studies* on such topics as the life and writings of the early Belarusian Saint Cyril of Turaŭ and a manuscript *tefsir* (a commentary on the Qur'an) that he had acquired for the library, written in Arabic script by Muslim Tatars living in Belarus who had retained their religion but used Belarusian as their everyday language. His research and writing led him to embrace the computer age with enthusiasm, creating a font modelled on the typeface employed by Skaryna.

The high regard in which his scholarship was held is shown by the award in 2008 of an honorary doctorate of the European Humanities University based in Vilnius. In the following year, a large volume of essays by his many friends and admirers was published to mark both his eightieth birthday and the fiftieth anniversary of his priesthood. The book contains a list of Fr Alexander's publications – it runs to eight pages, with eighteen books, and 190 articles and reviews. It was a matter of great personal satisfaction to him that a collection of his writings was published in Belarus in 2014.

Fr Alexander was very active in translating liturgical texts into Belarusian. There can be no doubt that he was drawn to translation by his sense of priestly responsibility for the Belarusian people, whether Orthodox or Catholic of the Western or Eastern rite. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he has created a liturgical language, amply demonstrating that Belarusian is a language fit for use in all spheres of human activity. His crowning achievement as a translator was his version of the Psalms, on which he worked during the last years of his life. Taking as his source the Greek Septuagint, he diligently compared it with the Vulgate Latin translation and the various versions in Church Slavonic, Russian and Ukrainian before finalising his Belarusian text.

Fr Alexander had already founded a charitable operation aimed at alleviating the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of an independent Belarusian state gave him a long-awaited opportunity to visit his homeland in 1990. The new-found freedom for the expression of national aspirations in the country led in part to the re-creation of the Eastern Rite Catholic (sometimes referred to as Greek Catholic or Uniate) Church that had been suppressed by the Tsarist imperial authorities back in the 1830s. He was to recall in later years the reception awaiting him upon his arrival in Minsk:

> Early in March 1990 I went ... to my native Belarus with a shipment of medical supplies for sick children, victims of the Chernobyl disaster. I travelled by train and arrived in Miensk early in the morning. Although I told practically nobody of my trip, to my surprise I found

> the station platform full of people waiting to greet me. Among them there was a group of young men and women who came to me and said: ‘Father, we are Uniates, and would like to talk to you later.’ Those were practically the first words I heard on my native soil. It was an unforgettable moment, for which I never cease to thank God. I saw that the Belarusian Greek-Catholic Church was not dead, only asleep, waiting to come to life as soon as a more favourable climate was established.

Fr Alexander also seized the chance to set up a scheme for bringing young people over to the UK for the kind of preliminary training that would enable them to continue their studies in order to become priests or biblical scholars; Belarus was in dire need of both.

A man of profound faith and firm principles, Fr Alexander drew people to himself with his human warmth, his ability to listen, his wisdom and his kindness. His intense patriotism for Belarus, coupled with his wide reading and knowledge of languages enabled him to respect the feelings and aspirations of others. He had what can only be described as an occasionally wicked sense of humour, which he could use to great effect in demolishing the sloppy work of some unfortunate hack scholar.

His capacity for hard work was phenomenal; rising at five o’clock to take Ben the dog for his first walk of the day, he would often be found in his study late at night reading or writing. He enjoyed eating – and cooking – the foods he remembered from his earlier years: the potato pancakes smothered in sour cream of his childhood, or the spaghetti with oil and garlic strewn with hot chilli peppers of his years in Rome – a dish he persuaded his local Italian restaurant to include on the menu.

In the acrostic poem that Vera Rich wrote especially for the volume that marked Fr Alexander’s fiftieth anniversary as a priest, we find the line ‘For he has played great roles upon life’s stage!’ That says it all really. May he rest in peace, and may his memory serve as a blessing and a source of inspiration to those who continue his work.

What follows is a very much abridged list of Fr Alexander’s publications – those that he wrote in English.

‘The Writings of Saint Cyril of Turau’, *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1965, pp. 4–15.

‘Western Influence on Byelorussian Literature in the XV and XVI centuries’, *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1966, pp. 80–91.

‘Spiritual Writings of St Cyril of Turau’, *Eastern Churches Review*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1967–68, pp. 347–358.

‘The Memoirs of Theodore Jeulasheuski, Assessor of Navahrudak (1546–1604)’, *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1968, pp. 269–348.

‘Life of St Euphrosyne of Polack’, translated and annotated, *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1969, pp. 3–24.

[with G.M. Meredith Owens] ‘The Byelorussian Tatars and their Writings’, *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1970, pp. 141–176.

‘Skaryna’s Prayer Book’, *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1972, pp. 339–358.

‘The Francis Skaryna Byelorussian Library in London’, *Solanus*, no. 9, 1974, pp. 10–15.

‘Some Old and Rare Books in the Francis Skaryna Library’, *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1976.

‘Bishop Ceslaus Sipovich (1914–1981)’, *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1981, pp. 5–13.

The Francis Skaryna Byelorussian Library and Museum, 1971–1981, London, 1981.

‘Independence and Chernobyl’, *Chernobyl in Belarus*, no. 4, 1992, pp. 1–2.

‘All Quiet in Belarus’, *Chernobyl in Belarus*, no. 5, 1994, pp. 1–4.

‘Religious Trends and Books in Sixteenth-Century Belarus’, *Solanus*, no. 8 (new series), 1994, pp. 33–52.

‘The Belarusian Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church’, *Zapisy BINiM*, no. 25, 2001, pp. 49–61.

‘Magdalena Radzivil and the Greek Catholic Church’, *Belarusian Chronicle*, no. 17, 2001, pp. 17–22.

March 25 and All That: Short Bibliographical Guide, London, 2004.

Princess Magdalena Radziwiłłand the Greek Catholic Church in Belarus, London, 2004.

Ceslaus Sipovich: The First Belarusian Catholic Bishop in the 20th Century (1914–1981), Minsk, 2007.

The full list of his publications can be found in *Your Sun Will Never Set Again, and Your Moon Shall Wane No More*, ed. Iryna Dubianieckaja *et al.,* Minsk, 2009, pp. 27–35. A selection of his writings in Belarusian has been brought together in Aliaksandr Nadsan, *Vybranaje*, Minsk, 2014.